

TAKING OUT THE TRASH: OR, A DISCOURSE ON LESS EXALTED READING MATERIAL

by Dakota Derryberry



When my father finds me immersed in inferior reading material, he likes to tell me that I read too much candy, and that I ought to satisfy my craving instead with something more worthwhile and filling.

What he means is that I read too much trash — space opera, genre fantasy, romance, even the occasional murder mystery — and not enough real literature, books with substance and meaning. While I acknowledge that my father might well have a point about the quality of the mass market paperbacks I devour at a positively alarming rate, I don't see any problem. Literature is well and good, and when I'm bored and have an hour, I like to curl up in my mother's pink rocking chair and read Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, and others besides. There are other times, though, when I'm tired, stressed, or generally unhappy, and then trash fills its own less exalted but no less necessary niche in my life.

Before fourth grade, while I liked books well enough and took no small amount of pride in reading everything that was required of me, I never felt the desire to grab a book for pleasure. That changed one afternoon in the school library when I chanced to pick up Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword* and read it all the way through in a single sitting. It was everything I'd dreamed about: a heroine out of nowhere, good defeating evil, magic around every corner, and true love at the end. From thence forth, I couldn't get enough of it. Over and over again, heros and heroines raced against time and fought against impossible enemies to defeat evil against all odds and expectations. In over a thousand books on over a hundred worlds, the important things remained constant: no matter how ragged in the beginning, the hero was worthy; everyone came by his just deserts; most importantly, everything was all right by the end. This fantastic world order was, and still is, for me, the essence of the appeal of 'trash': the stuff dreams are made of.

The ideal experienced by the reading of genre fiction comes in three indispensable parts. The first is the story, the purpose of which is to occupy the surface of the mind and to provide an interface for the next

two parts. The basic plot is generally provided by the genre; the familiarity allows the reader to pick out characters early on, and figure out which ones to watch and a general outline of what's to come. Still, changing setting and detail provides enough variation between books that the reader who isn't paying close attention (and I've found that when I'm in the mood for trash, I'm not in the mood for close attention) doesn't quite know what's coming. The story, the twisted developments and the bizarre circumstances, keep me reading and keep me entertained. The true addiction, however, comes from other sources.

The second part is the promise, a solemn pact between reader and writer that covers a few key points and allows the reader to relax and love the characters introduced in the novel. First, no one important will die. Best friends, family, and martyrs can and will be lost. Main characters, beloved characters, will live. I recently read David Weber's *Wind Rider's Oath* and nearly put down the book when convinced that Brandark had died. Only the knowledge that main characters don't die kept me reading, and it's fortunate that it did, because a page later I found that he'd only been knocked out. Second, everyone comes by his (or her) just deserts. In the final scene of Georgette Heyer's *These Old Shades*, simply by summing up the events of the book for a rapt audience, the hero induces the villain to commit suicide, frees said villain's put-upon wife (and allows her a hand in the inducement), reaffirms the heroine's role in society, and is acknowledged for his masterful work by all. Finally, there will be a happy ending. Even before the book was written, everyone knew that Vanyel of Mercedes Lackey's *Magic's Price* was doomed; still, after Vanyel died with his greatest friend in a successful last ditch effort to save the world, leaving a grieving lover and no further protection for his country behind, ten pages later the book managed a happy ending.

The third and last is the fulfillment of secret childhood fantasies. It's all those secrets never told from sheer embarrassment. In Lackey's *Magic's Pawn*, a half dead and seriously bereaved Vanyel watches his aunt and his sister ream out his father on the most horrible

parenting job ever. Or, moving from child to teenager, who ever wished “I could just do it anyway. Then he’ll see. I was right all along. I’m not a child, dangit!” In Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Star of Danger*, Larry does just that and winds up on the diplomatic mission of his dreams with the backing of the ranking concerned political officials. Or, and this has always been a personal favorite of mine, “What if I have a destiny? What if something happened tomorrow and everything changed? Wouldn’t it be great to save the world?” That one is epitomized in McKinley’s *The Blue Sword* (probably why I loved and still love it so dearly); Harry is uprooted with her parent’s death, kidnapped by a savage king — all because her world’s magic is pulling her to a destiny that’s truly the stuff of legends.

In the end, it’s not that I don’t like literature. It’s just that I like trash. Literature has intellectual appeal, aesthetic appeal, and real life appeal, in addition to the normal elements of character, plot, etc. To really get into it, I have to be in the proper frame of mind for enjoyment. When I’m not, curling up with the next installment of my favorite space opera relaxes me and cheers me up, and for this I’ll never give it up, no matter what my father says or how he teases me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dakota Derryberry (dderrybe@indiana.edu) is a senior at Bloomington High School South in Bloomington.